CATHOLIC ACTION APPLIED TO
THOSE WHO CANNOT SEE

Connolly, John J.

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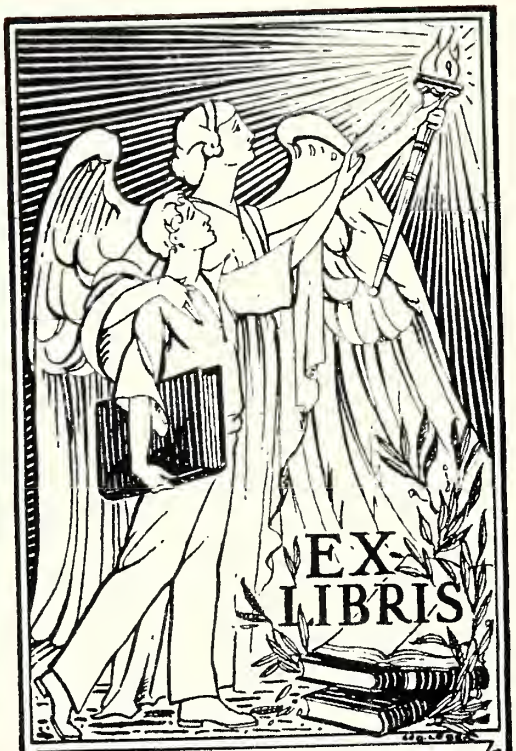

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CATHOLIC ACTION APPLIED TO THOSE WHO CANNOT SEE

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JOHN J. CONNOLLY

THERE is only one positive and complete solution of the problems of blindness. That is the one which God alone can give—the gift of sight. Since, in God's wisdom, this gift is granted to the few, there will always be the many who must courageously walk along the road of darkness. Workers for the blind generally agree that no adequate census of the blind has ever been taken in this country and that under present conditions none is possible. Estimates as to the number of blind people in the United States therefore vary greatly. Basing an estimate on our experience of four years' work with the blind, we hazard the figure of forty thousand as being the number of blind Catholics in the United States. Here is a world of darkness—a Catholic world of people who are blind. The problems of the seeing world are discouraging at times, but here we have all these problems multiplied and made more complicated by blindness, particularly the blindness of a seeing world that frequently sees only sightlessness but fails to see the man or woman who is sightless. The problems of blindness are not new, but they are today greatly increased. The speed of modern living, the gravitation to the city, the breakdown of the family life, mass production, materialistic philosophy, economic insecurity, all have made more difficult the problems of the blind.

But what of the Church and the blind in the United States? I have never seen any survey of Catholic work for the blind in our country. To the best of my knowledge, no such survey has ever been made, although it would prove very helpful.

Of the more than fifty schools for the blind in the United States, only three are Catholic. Of institutions for the adult blind, I personally know of only three under Catholic auspices. The work of transcribing Catholic literature into braille by machine presses has, until very recently, been confined to two presses.

Institutions alone cannot solve all the problems of the blind, as only a small number of them are resident in institutions. There remains a vast number who must look to individuals or local organizations for a solution of their problems. Many such there are in the United States. To mention only a few: there are the Sodalities of the Blessed Virgin, the Legion of Mary, the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Among the organizations interested in the transcribing of braille we may mention the monumental work accomplished by the Xavier Free Publication Society, the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, the Kenwood Braille Press, the Mercy Braille Clubs, and many others.

In the Archdiocese of Boston much excellent work has been done for the blind by individuals and organizations for many years. In 1928, a group of devoted women, known as St. Raphael's Guild, banded themselves together to inaugurate a retreat movement for blind women and girls under the direction of the Religious of the Cenacle at Brighton, Massachusetts.

Four years ago His Eminence, William Cardinal O'Connell, the Archbishop of Boston, observing the excellent work which had been done, decided the time opportune to organize, coordinate and expand the service to the sightless under diocesan auspices. Therefore, His Eminence, in 1936 founded The Catholic Guild for the Blind, "an Organization founded for the spiritual and material welfare of the blind of the Archdiocese of Boston."

The story of this work for the blind in the Archdiocese of Boston will give a fair idea of the possibilities of a program for Catholic Action for the benefit of the blind throughout the country. It is truly Catholic Action when we see the great amount of volunteer service performed under the direction of the Church—"the participation of the laity in the work of the apostolate under the supervision of the Hierarchy."

The focal point of the whole program is the retreat work for the blind. Retreats are held regularly for four separate groups of blind people: boys, girls, men and women, at the various retreat houses throughout the Diocese. Essential to all these retreats are the services of groups of volunteer workers who drive the blind to and from the retreat houses and act as guides during the time of retreat. The retreat program itself is not essentially different from the retreat for a sighted group.

Special value of these retreats lies in the fact that so many of the blind are restricted in their contacts with the Church. Their handicap keeps many of them from attending church services regularly and often deprives them of an opportunity to read Catholic literature.

These two difficulties have led to other activities of the Guild. To enable the blind to attend Sunday Mass and other church services, the Guild early formed a volunteer guide-service and now, with the assistance of these guides, many of the blind who have not been to church for years go every Sunday and some of them every day of the week.

words, what repercussions can be expected as a result of the aid now to be extended to Great Britain in the policing of the south Pacific?

Recent years, prior to the present conflict, have found us growing somewhat sceptical of the value of a too-great interest in that area. We have, for a number of motives, in the case of the Philippine Islands enacted legislation looking toward withdrawal in 1946. While it is quite possible that changing conditions in the Pacific might very justifiably postpone this action, yet what of our new commitments? Are we going to be held in the role of a Far East power, in spite of our desire to withdraw from that area?

Therefore, if only as a matter of academic interest, it might be of value to consider various possibilities implicit in our present actions, if rumors regarding our policy in the Pacific later assume reality. At the moment we have a one-ocean navy which, as a result of general understandings with various Spanish American countries, will be expected to patrol the greater part of the shorelines to the south, in addition to our own, if the necessity should develop. If diverted in part for patrol duty in the south Pacific, it will obviously be at a disadvantage in its operations elsewhere. Yet if we contemplate a definite policy of action in the Pacific, such must be done. It is true of course that defense plans involve a future two-ocean navy, with the addition of considerable tonnage. But that is not a matter of immediate possibility; on the contrary, it requires construction during the next several years. In the interim, the conflict in Europe goes on, and the jingoistic press in all countries moves from challenge to alarm, with this country daily coming closer to the war and a situation fraught with peril.

Furthermore, there is this which must also be considered. What are the responsibilities entailed by our present participation in any south Pacific conflict insofar as the council tables of a future post-war period are concerned? This is a tricky world, with the enemies of today for reasons of expediency becoming the bedfellows of tomorrow. No matter what one's sentiments in the matter, consideration must be given to the exigencies of the unpredictible future. Yet that is the very point that is ignored in the present welter of not very far-sighted emotionalism.

Western control of the lands of the south Pacific —Philippines, Dutch East Indies, Indo-China, India —represents in general the gleanings of eighteenth and nineteenth century imperialism. They are golcondas inhabited by peoples whose interests obviously are not ours and who, whether they appear to bear the yoke willingly or not, are in the status of inferiors to our superior Occidental civilization of steel and force. All justifying arguments to the contrary cannot alter the fact that the British, French, Hollanders and ourselves to a minor extent, have used these lands with self-interest, primary and dominant.

However, that is not the issue fundamentally. The real, challenging question is the future of the south Pacific in terms of basic American interests. At this writing, two of the owners of these lands have been subjugated by the Axis powers. If the Axis wins a complete victory, these Pacific islands are doomed to become the spoils of the victor. In the event that we now commit ourselves to their defense, will it be possible for us to withdraw, leaving them to their new masters? Or, on the other hand, will the circumstances of the situation force us to attempt to free them from their fate and become embroiled in a serious war, apart from the necessities of national defense?

On the other hand, if the Axis powers are decisively beaten, is there any guarantee that the former ownership of these areas will be restored, or better, will be capable of restoration? In this respect it must not be overlooked that Holland's continued ownership of the Netherlands Indies, for example, during the past century or more, has been the result of the mutual distrust and jealousy of the powers who prevented anyone's acquiring them. Therefore, in the event that they are not returned, will we, contrary to past practice, undertake to cooperate in their administration, placing us squarely in the middle of Pacific power politics with all the dangerous possibilities involved?

Again, let us assume that the present European conflict results in a stalemate and at the peace table these Pacific possessions are assigned, as the result of a compromise, to one or another of the Axis powers. Further, that the French or Netherland authorities refuse to have their respective territories allocated in this fashion. Will we inject ourselves into the situation and deny the right of the agreeing nations to make such an arrangement, particularly if the people of these conquered areas, on the basis of previous successful appeals to our idealism, request that we protect them against powerful aggressors?

Finally, if, in the course of the ensuing conflict in the Pacific, due to motivating influences originating elsewhere, or merely out of the realization on the part of the native peoples of these areas of their master's weakness, an uprising against occidental rule should arise, what then? We could of course stand aside and allow them to work out their own destinies. Unquestionably, however, in the heat of conflict it would be comparatively simple to convince ourselves that we owed it to the European masters of these areas, or to the native people themselves, obviously deluded by propagandists, to put down these revolts.

These are some of the dangers implicit in the situation of American participation in Pacific power-politics at the present time. The glib patter so prevalent at the moment disdains to consider them or superficially fails to take them into account through ignorance of the long-range possibilities of the situation. But they are present nevertheless. The world has changed considerably since the last war. Involving ourselves in the Pacific at the present time will set in motion a chain of circumstances from which we will find it impossible to withdraw. It is a situation fraught with extreme peril and can ultimately bring the interests of this country into jeopardy.

The Guild has also striven to make available an increased supply of Catholic literature in braille. Transcribing into braille may be done by one of two methods, either by hand or by machine press. Both of these methods have been used by the Guild.

Hand transcription is efficient only when a small number of copies of a work is desired. Volunteer transcribers have put single copies of many works into braille by this method. A braille project of the Works Projects Administration has transcribed numerous other works of Catholic interest. At the present time, two braille projects in the vicinity of Boston are devoting part of their time to the brailling of textbooks for our students at Catholic colleges.

Transcription by machine press is the method to be followed when a number of copies of the same work is desired. The Guild's first venture into this field was in the brailling of Rev. Hilary Weger's *Studies in Religion,* a textbook for adult discussion clubs and for Catholic students in public high schools. This text, covering a three-year course, was begun a year ago. The first volume of this series was used in our religious education work last term. As this is written, McNeill's brochure on *The Sacramentals* has just been adapted for use as a textbook for blind high-school students.

The most noteworthy advance in the field of Catholic literature in braille to be made in recent years has been the transcription of the *Catholic Digest.* The first braille copy of the *Digest* appeared in September of this year. Credit for this must go to the understanding and far-seeing editors of the *Catholic Digest.* The Catholic Guild for the Blind, however, is proud of its share in this new work, having acted as intermediary for the *Digest* in all of the arrangements for the brailling. Catholic education is a most important part of the work of the Guild. In 1939, Perkins Institution, which is the Massachusetts State School for the Blind, located in Watertown, Massachusetts, decided to give more time to religious and cultural subjects in the curriculum. The new program permits the students to receive religious instructions during school hours by representatives of the several religious denominations found in the student body. His Eminence, the Cardinal, appointed The Catholic Guild for the Blind to the work of teaching the Catholic children of the School.

Since that time the Assistant Director of the Guild, together with eleven of the Diocesan Sisters of St. Joseph, who are proficient readers of braille, have been teaching at the School each week. The Catholic children enrolled are in every grade from kindergarten through advanced high-school. Our teachers there have made a study of methods of teaching the blind and are putting these methods into practice in the teaching of religion. The problem of teaching the Mass has required a great deal of attention. All that appeals to the sense of sight in the Mass is, of course, lost to the blind.

Nor can any help be derived from the teaching of the Mass by the prayers of the Mass, since no missal is available in braille. A complete missal in braille would be so bulky as to be entirely out of the question. Even the smallest prayer book for children is an unwieldly volume when brailled.

Some picture of what is taking place at the altar is desirable, though not the detailed explanation given to sighted children. In order that this picture may be available, a miniature altar with scaled size models of the vessels used at Mass was obtained from the Catechetical Guild and miniature vestments have been made by interested women. These are sufficient to give a picture of the Mass.

This briefly covers the spiritual program of service to the blind, but Holy Mother Church realizes that man is a composite being made up of body and soul. In the spirit of the Church the Guild seeks to serve the whole man, body and soul.

The guide service mentioned above is not restricted merely to those desirous of attending religious service. No, there are many other places, like the sighted, that the blind wish to go. Supplementing the work of the guides is a motor corps. Volunteer drivers give of their time to take the blind for rides. Other volunteers serve as visitors. This service is particularly for those who live alone or who have few if any callers, for whom dark day follows dark night in unbroken sequence, and long indeed are the lonely hours. In such cases, the Guild introduces to the blind person a sighted individual who has volunteered to share his time and friendship.

Next there is the reader service. This is an invaluable form of Catholic Action. Necessarily, Catholic braille literature is limited, but the reader who gives his services to the blind makes available the latest in worth while Catholic literature. The assistance of readers is especially valuable to students. This form of Catholic Action makes use of volunteers to assist students at the school for the blind and also blind students who are attending college and graduate schools.

Since the blind are just the same as we are, they enjoy the things which we enjoy. Hence, a recreational program. In the summer there are outings to the country and to the seashore practically every week and the program of the day is complete from weenie-roasts to swimming. Theatre parties are arranged and these are real treats. A young woman was once asked by a seeing friend just what pleasure she derived from the talking pictures. She explained that she derived the same pleasure as we do from listening to a drama on the radio.

Then there are those memorable days at the ball game—believe it or not. Among the most loyal and expert fans we must include great numbers of the blind. Each year the Guild makes arrangements with the Boston National Baseball Club to take the blind to the game. At one of these games recently there were one hundred blind persons in attendance, women as well as men. To avoid accident, the blind were placed behind a screen at the catcher's box. One of the coaches was delegated to give a play-by-play description and he in turn was aided by the broadcast of the game received through two portable radios placed on either side of the group.

All that has been said thus far has not taken into consideration the financial needs of the blind. This is an important phase of the work of the Guild.

Among the blind, as among any group of handicapped people, you will find many who will need financial assistance. The Guild's work is to seek out the proper agencies of relief and also to give supplementary budget assistance. The Guild is also interested in the higher education of the talented blind. This year scholarships for the blind were secured from Holy Cross College, the University of Notre Dame, Boston College, Regis College and the New England Conservatory of Music. At each of these five institutions there is one blind student in attendance, fully capable of meeting the sighted students in scholarly competition. It is our hope that they may bring honor to themselves and through their success, open the door of opportunity to others.

The employment service of the Guild seeks to find places for the blind in industry. This is one of the surest ways of bringing happiness to the blind, as to the sighted—to provide an opportunity for them to give expression to the talents which they possess. What can they do? In the business world the blind may act as sales managers, advertising managers, public-relations counsels, typists and ediphone operators, stenographers, switchboard operators, insurance brokers, executives of all kinds. A proof of the ability of blind stenographers can be found in the work of the blind stenographer employed in the Guild office.

In the professional world there are successfu lawyers, psychologists, osteopaths, social workers teachers, professors, lecturers and librarians. Ther have also been even a few outstanding statesmer In the industrial world there are the familiar occu pations of the blind: chair caning, basket weaving mat making, broom making, and piano tuning i which the blind are second to none. In any grou of the blind there are those who have always bee without their sight and those who have been blind ed. The problems of these groups are slightly dif ferent. For one it is adjustment; for the other re adjustment, the remaking of their lives to conform with the world of darkness.

The greatest of the problems of the blind is no so much sightlessness as the blindness of a seeing world which cannot understand how a person ever after years of training can be greater for a handicap. Most of the people in the world think of the blind as different from themselves. They fail to understand the blind and, consequently, do not realize the help that is needed.

This lack of understanding on the part of the sighted is a fundamental problem of blindness and until the world accepts the blind as normal human beings, we can never hope to understand nor solve the problems of the blind. We shall understand the blind only when we know them.

THAT ALL MAY BE ONE IN THE MYSTICAL BODY

BEATRICE B. BROWN

BEFORE the last war, the comforting illusion was generally held that the world was getting better, that it was, in fact, better than at any time in the past, and especially, better than during the Middle Ages. To cynics who questioned this theory, its adherents replied by pointing out triumphantly that criminals were no longer publicly executed; anesthetics relieved pain; education was universal and compulsory; and, above all, religious persecution (that is, the persecution of Protestants by Catholics) was no longer possible in the enlightened times.

These and similar arguments were advanced to prove that we were indeed fortunate to have been spared the ignorance, cruelty and bigotry of the twelfth century and to enjoy the comfort, security and freedom of the twentieth. A textbook of European history published in 1913 predicted the end of war as a result of the Hague conferences; the spread of international good will through increased use of the airplane; the abolition of disease through advances in science, and of poverty through governmental legislation.

These naïve conclusions of the intellectuals of that day wring from us now wry laughter. Their Utopia has ended in a shambles. True, criminals are no longer executed in our public squares. Instead, people convicted of no crime—men, women, children, the sick and old, teachers, shopkeepers, housewives, those engaged in peaceful and profitable pursuits—are slaughtered indiscriminately in these wars which the Third Hague Conference (according to the authority mentioned) was to have ended by its approaching deliberations, scheduled for 1915. The bombing plane does not choose its victims according to age, sex, or occupation; all stand an equal chance of being burned or buried alive, or blown to pieces, by this machine which, according to the same authority, was to prove an instrument of international understanding and

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